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PLANNING AT THE GRASS ROOTS.

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THE ISSUES OF A LOCAL COMMUNITY SHOULD NOT BE ARBITRARILY SETTLED AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL. THERE SHOULD BE A RECOGNITION OF THE DIFFERENT LEVELS OF PROCESS PLANNING WHICH ARE--THE NATIONAL, THE REGIONAL, AND THE LOCAL. ALMOST EVERY GROUP THAT IS ORIENTED TO RURAL YOUTH HAS A NATIONAL OFFICE WITH REGIONAL DIVISIONS. THE SPEAKER SUGGESTS THAT THE CONFERENCE SHOULD FOCUS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF A STYLE OF ACTION FOR PLANNING AT THE LOCAL LEVEL AND THAT THE QUICKEST WAY TO CULTIVATE A FREE SWINGING STYLE OF ACTION FOR THE LOCAL COMMUNITY IS THROUGH PERSONAL REACTION TO CONCRETE CASES. SEVERAL CASES ARE CITED WHERE PROJECTS PLANNED AT A HIGH LEVEL WERE UNSUCCESSFUL, AND IT IS SHOWN HOW LOCAL INVOLVEMENT COULD OR DID AID IN MAKING THESE PROJECTS MORE SUCCESSFUL. THIS SPEECH WAS PRESENTED AT THE NATIONAL OUTLOOK CONFERENCE ON RURAL YOUTH, OCTOBER 23-26, 1967, WASHINGTON, D.C., SPONSORED JOINTLY BY THE U.S. DEPARTMENTS OF AGRICULTURE, HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE, INTERIOR, AND LABOR, OEO, AND THE PRESIDENT'S COUNCIL ON YOUTH OPPORTUNITY. (ES)

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"PLANNING AT THE GRASS ROOTS"

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"Let's make sure we are all on the same wave length." What are we talking about?

"Planning at the grass roots." Let's tear that apart. "To plan" means to settle on a way of acting. This implies communication and some degree of common understanding. "At the grass roots" points to where the action is, ie. the local community.

And this is the contradiction. Here we are at a national conference. Our topic is "Planning at the grass roots". Can we be so naive as to arbitrarily settle issues for any local community. This is an impossible task.

Then what do we do? Recognize the different levels of process planning: the national, the regional, and the local. Almost every group that is oriented to rural youth has a national office with regional divisions. Where we want to focus our attention is toward developing a style of action for the local level.

Before we can begin to move, we need to recognize our common ground. That we uphold the sacredness and dignity of each and every human person. That we want to make life in this community more fully human, with maximum freedom of choice accorded to every member of the community. That the members of the local community are the final decision makers.

But we are not blind. We recognize that our society, with its many built-in systems, severely limits that choice. At times, the local choice is almost non-existent. Such an un-free style of life is our real enemy.

The quickest way to cultivate a free swinging style of action for the local community is through personal reaction to concrete cases. For instances:
1) A tenement section of 10 blocks square in west side Chicago. A definite problem area. Both the Boys Club and the YMCA made efforts to set up a center. It was a top level approach, setting up their program that had been tested nationwide. Initial reaction was positive, then a falling off, finally a

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freeze out. Why? After two months of listening on the streets, they found that local youths felt no stake in the center. It was known as an "Outsiders" program. The Y switched to using several detached youth workers, simply to be available on the streets and in the hangouts. Now decisions were in the hands of local youths and the program clicked.

2) A community of 500 in the heart of Appalachia. Recognized need was a lack of recreation for teens. A new minister stirred up concern for a community meeting. He proposed an old store building be renovated, adult chaperones be secured, and a program be set up. No one said much, but everyone went along with him. The program started off with a bang. But when adult support vanished like the morning dew, the only excuse was, "He pushed it; well, let him do it." The center folded in less than a year.

3) A sponsored program of 500 summer volunteers in Appalachia. Living in the homes of the local people and working mainly with youths, a considerable impact was made throughout the region. Operational policy stressed that the key was the local decision making. This worked well, until some volunteers felt a need to erect a visible monument. They pushed communities into building community centers and ball diamonds. Today, a number of these centers and playing fields stand idle. If you asked why: "They are mighty good hearted. They thought this is what was needed." But was it? Again, who was doing the choosing?

4) A coal camp in West Virginia. A new preacher arrived to find the road to the church rutted and impassable. At a called meeting, he proposed the road be repaired. A nearby slatepile could make the road like new. No one agreed or disagreed; they just let him have his way. Then the rains came, and the slate turned into a sea of mud. What went wrong? Everyone was invited to speak out at the open meeting, but no one said a word. He later learned that they felt it would have been impolite to over-rule him in such a public way. And so they didn't feel free enough to speak out.

5) A small tourist town in Virginia. The Scout leader appointed a committee to deal with a minor problem. They insisted the whole troop solve the problem. The troop met and then decided that a committee be appointed to do the job. Finally, the committee was willing to act. Now it was their choice, not merely the whim of their leader.

6) A small community in the mountains where volunteers had come to help organize the poor. The volunteers began with talking to persons about their problems. This led to community meetings. And this gradually awakened the poor to the fact that they had a say in what was happening to them. But the volunteers raced ahead in pushing one of their pet ideological goals. The effort collapsed.

7) The Youth Commission in Appalachia. A major effort is to foster forums for sharing of ideas and ideals. Formerly, we took the lecture line with

stress on informational content. It was a neat pre-packaged program, run from the top down. Student involvement was minimal. Now we have swung to idea-starter talks with emphasis on shared experiences and total student leadership. The programs seem more ragged, but participation is excellent. System oriented students find all this freedom a bit staggering.

8) Washington, D. C. Government sponsorship can change the rural scene almost overnight. For instance, stimulated flow of people from the city to planned new towns. Or relocation of people to make way for recreational development. What we must insist upon is that future planning guarantee full voice and maximum freedom of choice at the local level. The recent oversight and tragedy in Eastern Kentucky need not be repeated a hundred times over. Total process planning demands national, regional and local participation. Ignoring any of these invites disaster.

If our planning is directed toward maximum freedom of choice at the local level, then full victory will never be ours. For this is a process, always begun, but never fully achieved. And since the status quo often restricts the maximum exercise of free choice, then a change in the system becomes mandatory. And this change can come about best through total process planning: ie. through national, regional and local participation. Far from being the end of democracy, this may prove to be its second spring.